

## Commercial Whale Watching Characterization FAQs

### *What is ocean planning?*

The ocean and the livelihoods it supports are vital to New England. People in our region greatly value our ocean heritage and are seeking to use resources from the ocean in new and increasingly complex ways. At the same time, environmental changes are affecting the health of ocean life and habitats. Balancing these needs is a challenging process that requires careful thought and decision-making. By collecting existing information to describe human activities and natural resources in the ocean, **ocean planning** is a way to address these challenges. Government agencies and stakeholders are working together to anticipate needs, set priorities, and make decisions from a regional perspective. **The result?** More effective decisions informed by public input to ensure protection and sustainable use of ocean resources. For more information on ocean planning, see [neoplan.org](http://neoplan.org).

### *What is the purpose of the recreational characterization study?*

As part of the ocean planning effort, this study will characterize coastal and marine recreational uses in the Northeast (NY to ME), gathering data about where, when, and how people recreate along New England's coast and in the ocean to help ensure recreational uses be considered in the broader context of ocean planning. More specifically, the study will collect information on the following activities: whale watching, SCUBA diving, sailing regattas and saltwater sportfishing tournaments/derbies as well as day beach use, surfing, kayaking, swimming, and wildlife viewing. The project will not collect data on fishing or recreational boating from individual users as those activities are being addressed through other studies. For more information on how other recreational uses have been/are being addressed, see <http://neoplan.org/projects/recreation/>

### *Who is conducting the study?*

This study is being conducted by the [Northeast Regional Planning Body \(RPB\)](http://neoplan.org) and has contracted with a project team consisting of [SeaPlan](http://seaplan.org), the [Surfrider Foundation](http://surfrider.org), and [Point97](http://point97.org). The project team has been working with representatives from the commercial whale watching industry to develop a survey methodology that will best characterize areas that are important to the industry.

### *Who has been involved so far?*

The project team has sought input from regional industry experts, including individuals from Odyssey Whale Watches, Bar Harbor Whale Watch, Boston Harbor Cruises, Granite State Whale Watch, Coastal Research and Education Society of Long Island (CRESLI), Blue Ocean Society, Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary, Whale and Dolphin Conservation, and the Center for Coastal Studies to scope this survey. We are also receiving guidance from a project steering committee consisting of representatives from state and federal agencies, including the Maine Coastal Program, the New Hampshire Coastal

Program, the Massachusetts Office of Coastal Zone Management, the Rhode Island Coastal Resources Management Council, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection Office of Long Island Sound Programs, the New York State Department of State, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, and the United States Coast Guard. These industry and agency experts have identified the in-person meeting format as the best way to foster conversation and discussion among industry members and the project study team.

#### *What information are we looking for?*

The project team is looking to the industry to help us identify areas that are routinely used by commercial whale watching operations in the region, recognizing that this information may be subjective. We recognize that regularly-used areas change depending on year, season, and weather conditions. These areas may be defined by a high likelihood of spotting whales, but also may be affected by proximity to the homeport, typical oceanographic or weather patterns, presence of other types of vessels, and species and behaviors that are likely to be observed. We anticipate that survey participants will use areas depicted on nautical charts such as seafloor characteristics (i.e. Stellwagen Bank) and/or navigational reference points (i.e. shipping lane buoy markers) to guide the mapping of these areas. In-person workshops will allow participants to further describe these areas to account for variations in species, seasonal, and annual patterns.

#### *How will this information be used?*

The data collected during this survey will not be used for regulatory purposes. Rather, data from the study will be used by the RPB to develop a draft Northeast Ocean Plan and will be integrated into the [Northeast Ocean Data Portal](#), a decision support and information system for managers, planners, scientists, and project proponents. The information will be combined with data being collected from other recreational industries to help ensure that recreational uses are considered in future ocean planning. The data will also be available to industry members for use in business planning or to demonstrate the importance of your industry. We will continue to work with industry experts to determine how best to represent the data from a regional standpoint.